




Welcome...to the Black Poplar trail

Enjoy the **sights** experience the **sounds** smell the seasonal **scents** a breath of **fresh air!**

The Black Poplar Trail is a 5 1/2 mile (9 km) walk on flat terrain between the villages of Wilstone and Long Marston. It follows public footpaths, quiet lanes and ditches to discover the best examples of Black Poplar trees, and provides delightful views of the Chilterns escarpment. The walk takes you through two attractive villages and across the distinctive flood plain landscape of the vale of Aylesbury. Some of the paths can be muddy in wet weather.

The walk starts and finishes at Wilstone village hall where there are car parking spaces, but it is possible to reach Wilstone by bus or bicycle from Tring and Aylesbury. Alternatively, you can start the walk in Long Marston. Please ring Travel line on 0870 608 2608 for details about public transport.

-  Please be considerate in the countryside - keep to footpaths, especially through crops, and leave farm gates as you find them.
-  Please keep dogs under control, on a leash in fields with livestock, and clear up after them.
-  Please take your litter home and leave the wild flowers where they grow best.

Why are Black Poplars rare?

The native Black Poplar is one of Britain's most endangered trees, and the Vale of Aylesbury is the trees' classic location'. Currently, there are reckoned to be about 5,000 trees here, of which around 1,200 are in the Long Marston, Wilstone and Puttenham area. Black Poplars prefer to grow with their roots in damp ground, so you find them mostly along streams, ditches and by ponds. Although this habitat is common in the locality, some ditches and ponds may be filling in because of lack of maintenance.

Individual trees are dioecious, that is, they are either male or female. Most of the Black Poplars here were probably planted in the nineteenth century. Because the female trees produce masses of fluffy seed which can be inconvenient, female cuttings were rarely used. Even if the male and female trees grow near to each other, the seed has to land on a piece of mud that stays wet for some days before a new tree germinates. Sometimes the tree will regenerate through branches falling into wet ground, but this means of reproduction produces a clone which restricts genetic variation. Often fallen trees are 'tidied up' quickly. The population of surviving trees is ageing and a few succumb to the wind and fall over every year.

For all reasons, the population of Black Poplars has declined.

What have Black Poplars ever done for us?

Mature and pollarded Black Poplars are an important element in the special landscape of the area, especially since the loss of Elm trees. They follow the ditches and streams as they thread their way through the clay vale. Black Poplars were a resource for the local economy. They grow fast. Their use as hedging stakes may account for the appearance of mature Black Poplar trees at regular intervals in hedgerows. The wood is soft and fire resistant, so it is said to have been utilised locally to make matches, bean poles, fruit baskets, wattle and for cattle fodder. People remember the wood being used in sheep hurdles to confine the sheep at night when they were brought down from the Chiltern downland, and some Black Poplar wood found its way into First World War rifle butts.



Poplar hawk moth

Black Poplars are closely related to Willows and the buds, bark and leaves are rich in an aspirin related substance: salicin, so may have been used as remedies for pain relief, heart trouble, coughs, rheumatism and inflammation.

Black Poplars are valuable as a wildlife habitat especially for insects, such as the Black Poplar Hawk moth and Puss moths; holes in the trees provide nesting sites for owls and roosting sites for bats.

Perhaps because of its gnarled bark, or the story that grief stricken, black clad women were turned into Black Poplars in Roman mythology, the tree was once considered sacred. Because of their rapid growth rate, the trees may have been regarded as a fertility symbol and were once dressed as part of wedding ceremonies. An annual Black Poplar flag dressing ceremony still occurs in Aston upon Clun in Shropshire.



Black Poplar trees

Safeguarding a rare species

In the Long Marston and Wilstone area, a lot of work has been undertaken to safeguard the population for the future including surveying and mapping existing trees over 21 square kilometres. The survey work was undertaken as a community response to Local Agenda 21: it requires annual updating to monitor the effects of climate change and other events on the status of the trees. Many individual trees have been managed by careful pollarding and lopping (cutting back heavy branches to prevent the tree from splitting). Some cuttings or 'truncheons', taken from trees in the vicinity, have been planted along ditches and in hedgerows.

Nowadays, the fallen timber is used to make charcoal for barbeques : a good example of sustainable use which reduces demand on forests abroad, and creates a small local industry.

..& enjoy! the sounds

How can I find some Black Poplars?

- They're big! Up to 30 metres high.
- They can tend to lean to one side.
- They usually grow by water or in damp areas.
- The lowest branches sweep downwards but, finally, the tips arch upwards.
- The bark is often deeply ridged with bosses and burrs.
- The leaves are triangular; dark green above and paler below making a definitive rustling sound in the breeze. In spring, they are light green and in autumn they turn to pale yellow.
- In spring, the male catkins, sometimes called 'Devil's fingers', are vivid red.

LOOK AT THE PICTURES!



Black Poplar bark

Black Poplar leaves



'Devil's fingers'

Local Heritage Initiative

By providing funds, advice and support, the local heritage initiative helps communities care for the special features that make each locality as unique as a footprint. It is collecting records and stories to create a national archive of England's rich and diverse local heritage, for the enjoyment of future generations.

the Black Poplar trail

Many thanks

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Further Information



Local Heritage initiative

Countryside Management Service

West Central Area, CMS Building, The Nursery Site,
Hixberry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL4 0TZ
Tel: 01727 848168 Fax: 01727 811797
Web: <http://enquire.hertscc.gov.uk/cms>

If you, a neighbour or member of your community would like this leaflet produced in another language or format (large print or audio cassette), please contact the CMS

the Black Poplar trail

9 kilometre trail
between the villages of
Wilstone and Long Marston

9 kilometres of trail to explore ... naturally brilliant!



The Old Church Tower

Situated at the end of quiet Chapel Lane, the Norman Tower is the only remnant of a 12th Century Chapel of Ease, which was pulled down in 1883. It is a Grade 2 listed building which was restored in 2002. There are information boards within the small churchyard giving details of local history.



Millhoppers Nature Reserve

Millhoppers Pasture is a 3 acre area of unimproved grassland ringed by blackthorn scrub and some magnificent Black Poplars, bisected by a stream and with a central marshy area. In the past, some of the streams powered water mills and the name 'Millhoppers' refers to the vessels used for corn storage.

It was acquired by Butterfly Conservation in 1997 with an emphasis on encouraging grassland butterflies like the Marbled White: however there is a wide range of flora and fauna within the reserve, all of which are monitored. It is managed by a local conservation group and visitors are welcome to explore and encounter the wildlife.



Wilstone Village

There's a shop, the Half Moon pub, a sixteenth century inn, to provide refreshments, a picnic area by the Grand Union Canal and St. Cross Church to visit. Find out about the last witch to be lynched in Hertfordshire.



Wilstone Reservoir



Long Marston Village

The village has All Saints Church and some attractive thatched, timber framed and weather boarded cottages. Should you feel the need for refreshment, there's a shop and two pubs: The Boot and the Queen's Head.



Walk Directions

1. Leave the Wilstone village hall car park and continue past the church to Chapel End Lane. Follow the lane and track to the end, over the stile and right over the next stile. In the next field, at the fork, take the left path across the field.
2. Cross the canal, bear right across the next field to the footbridge and stile, then go straight ahead to Astrope Lane.
3. Turn left and at the road junction bear right to the stile and bear right again to cross the footbridge. Turn left, left over the next stile and right to another stile. Turn left to the old church tower.
4. At the end of Chapel Lane, bear right and turn right immediately after the school to Astrope Lane. Turn right, go past the houses and take the footpath on the left passing Millhoppers reserve to Astrope Lane. Turn left and left again at the road junction along Tring Road.
5. At the next junction, go along the footpath opposite. After crossing a footbridge turn right and, in a few yards, turn right into a garden. Turn right across a stream and stile, turn left to a gate and re-enter the garden, then pass through a kissing gate.
6. Turn left and, after going through a gap in the hedge, turn right to a canal bridge. Go over the bridge, right along the towpath and take the footpath on the left to Wilstone.

Key

- Trail
- Black Poplar trees
- Church
- Shop
- Pub
- Car Park
- Bus stop
- Tower
- Village Hall (START / FINISH)
- Farm
- Millhoppers

Tring Reservoirs and the Grand Union Canal

Built to supply water to the main line of the Grand Union Canal and its arms to Wendover and Aylesbury, Tring Reservoirs are famous for their wildlife, and have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The tranquil setting of the reservoirs and the local canal can be enjoyed by all, with opportunities for walking, fishing and birdwatching. Contact British Waterways (tel. 01442 825938) for more information.